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A CAHNERS/R. R. BOWKER PUBLICATION — THE INTERNATIONAL NEWS MAGAZINE OF BOOK PUBLISHING — AUGUST 24, 1992 — $3.00

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Publishers Weekly

VOLUME 239 NUMBER 38
ISSN 0000-0019

THE INTERNATIONAL NEWS MAGAZINE OF BOOK PUBLISHING

AUGUST 24, 1992

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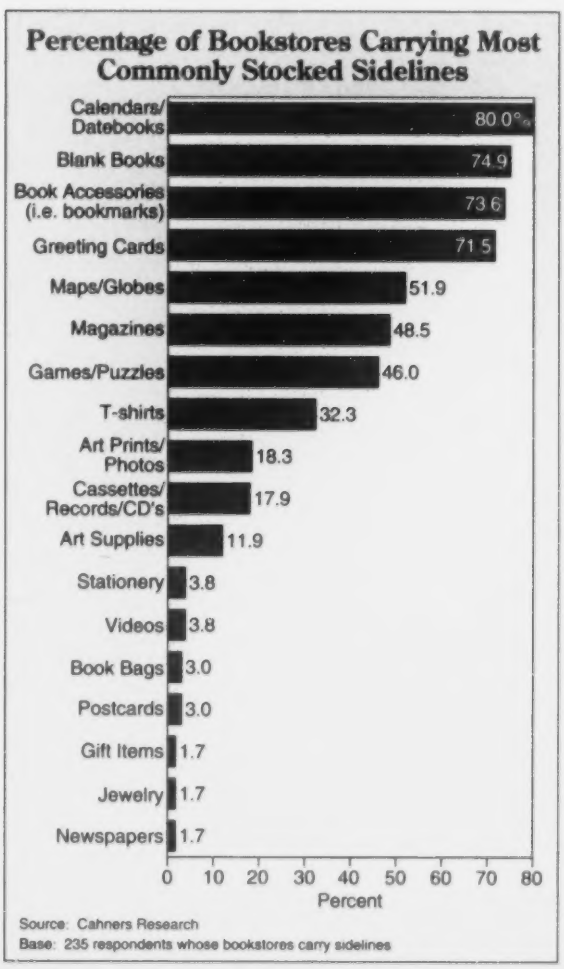
Selling Sidelines

Booksellers provide some basic facts on the size of the market and what they carry

BY MARIA HEIDKAMP

From calendars to cards, mugs to magazines, sidelines are a profit-making addition to many bookstores. In some cases, they are the reason certain customers venture into a bookstore in the first place. Three-quarters of booksellers who carry sidelines believe they have customers who come in just for those non-book items, a recent Cahners Research survey found. Of course, getting people into the store may in turn lead to additional book purchases. (Three-quarters of the respondents answered yes when asked if having sidelines helped them sell books.)

The chart below shows the most commonly stocked bookstore sidelines. (Other items that are not included on the chart, because they were infrequently cited, are candles/incense/potpourri, office supplies, pottery, teaching supplies, glassware/mugs and magnets.) In terms of unit sales, greeting cards, calendars, magazines, book accessories (i.e., bookmarks) and blank books are the best-selling adult sidelines, according to the survey, which was based on 235 respondents among general independent, specialty, children's only, college/university and national and regional chain bookstores that carry sidelines. Of the children's products for this same mix of stores, bookmarks, games/puzzles, coloring books, records and dolls/plush characters were the best-sellers. Some of the other facts and figures from the survey include:



- 93% of the 252 bookstores responding carry sidelines. Those who don't carry sidelines cited lack of space as a primary reason.
- Bookstores had average sales of $75,425 from sidelines in 1990. (Average total gross sales for these stores was $708,720.)
- Adult sidelines accounted for 64% of sidelines sales; the remaining 36% represents sales of children's items.
- Bookstores devote an average of 19% of their total space (473 square feet) to sidelines.
- 26% of the stores surveyed said they had plans to increase the space they devote to sidelines by an average of 15% or 71 square feet.
- 83% of booksellers said sidelines offer a greater profit margin than books, indicating that the average markup for books is 45% while the markup for sidelines is 56%.
- 52% of booksellers said they thought sidelines sales were driven by book sales; 41% said they thought they were not.
- 75% of booksellers said sidelines helped sell books. Reasons for this include: sidelines attract customers; sidelines that go together with books attract customers; sidelines help maintain the profit margin necessary to stay in business and calendar season brings in customers.
- 38% of booksellers responding said they had stopped carrying certain sidelines. Of those, 17% dropped games and puzzles primarily due to lack of demand; 15% dropped magazines due mostly to lack of profit.

There are other reasons—aside from low turnover or low margins—for dropping sidelines. Shrinkage can be a problem, including theft of small items such as pocket games or losses due to open packages in the case of some boxed games. Booksellers have dropped certain items after finding them too expensive for their customers. Competition from nearby card or toy stores can also effect the selection of sidelines. (One children's bookseller found she was competing with herself; she dropped wrapping paper because her store provides gift wrapping as a free service.)

Some booksellers prefer to focus on sidelines that are book-related. Book/game and book/toy combinations offer potentially high-profit opportunities for children's booksellers making gift suggestions. The challenge for booksellers is to find the mix of products that works in their store and keep the sidelines inventory up-to-date.

Sidelines is a new monthly *PW* column that will report on sideline trends, marketing ideas and booksellers' experiences with certain products. Suggestions from booksellers and others are welcome.

Did you loan away the big Fall Announcement issue...?
Have you misplaced the issue on the children's book scene...?
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Did you miss PW's last analysis of international publishing...?

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This index is provided as a service.
The Publisher does not assume any liability for errors or omissions.

Publishers Weekly (ISSN 0000-0019) RPUSA 123397457 is published weekly, with the exception of the last week in December and with additional issues in January and February and with a combined July 20 and July 21 issue. Published by the Cahners Publishing Company, a Division of Reed Publishing USA, 275 Washington St., Newton MA 02158-1630. Terrence M. McDermott, President/Chief Operating Officer; Frank J. Sibley, Executive Vice President; Robert T. Brawn, Sr. Vice President/General Manager; Jerry D. Neth, Senior Vice President/Publishing Operations; J.J. Walsh, Senior Vice President/ Finance; Thomas J. Dellamaria, Senior Vice President/Production and Manufacturing; Ralph Knupp, Vice President/Human Resources. Circulation records are maintained at Fulfillment Corp. of America, 205 West Center St., Marion, OH 43302. Second Class postage paid at New York, N.Y. and additional mailing offices. **POSTMASTER: Send address changes to PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, P.O. Box 1979, Marion, OH 43305.** All editorial and advertising correspondence should be addressed to the office of publication: PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, 249 West 17th St., New York, NY 10011; telephone: 212/645-0067; telex:12-7703; fax: 212/242-7216. Address circulation correspondence and changes of address to PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, P.O. Box 1979, Marion, OH 43305 telephone 1-800-842-1669; in Canada and all other countries, telephone: 1-614-382-3322. Printed in USA.
PUBLISHERS WEEKLY copyright 1992 by Reed Publishing USA; Robert L. Krakoff, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer.
SUBSCRIPTION PRICES: U.S.A.: 1 year $119, 2 years $199, 3 years $279. Canada: 1 year $177, 2 years $301, 3 years $425. Air Delivery to all other countries: 1 year $260, 2 years $442, 3 years $624. (Remit in U.S. funds only). Single copies are available at $5.00 for regular issues and $10.00 for Announcement issues. PUBLISHERS WEEKLY is a registered trademark of Reed Properties, Inc., used under license. ☐ Specialized Business Magazines For Building and Construction, Research, Technology, Electronics, Computing, Printing, Publishing, Health Care, Food Service, Packaging, Environmental Engineering, Manufacturing, Entertainment, Media, Home Furnishings, Interior Design and Lodging. ☐ Specialized Consumer Magazines For Childcare, Boating and Wedding Planning.

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